DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 272 258 JC 860 450

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TITLE Writing Instruction in the Two-Year College. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION ERIC Clearinghouse for Junior Colleges, Los Angeles, Calif.
PUB DATE Aug 86
NOTE 6p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Information Analyses - ERIC Information Analysis Products (071)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Community Colleges; *Feedback; Holistic Evaluation; *Teaching Methods; Two Year Colleges; Two Year College Students; Writing Evaluation; *Writing Exercises; *Writing Instruction; Writing Skills
IDENTIFIERS ERIC Digests

ABSTRACT

This digest draws upon the thirteen published volumes of "Inside English" to offer a summary of practitioners' advice on techniques to improve two-year college students' writing skills. First, the paper summarizes underlying principles of writing instruction, indicating that: (1) usage, formal grammar, phonics, and spelling are best learned in a context; (2) students learn to write and read by performing real tasks; (3) drills may be useful following diagnosis of specific weaknesses, but not as a substitute for whole writing assignments; (4) students need help during the writing process; and (5) sentence building is more productive than analysis or labeling. The importance attached by the instructors to designing writing exercises tailored in form and content to the students' skill levels is noted. The paper then offers brief descriptions of writing assignments designed to build confidence in writing ability and emphasize communication skills, including clustering, modeling, brainstorming, and controlled writing, free writing, and journal writing. Other exercises more appropriate for more advanced students are also outlined; these may include summaries, practice essay exams, and computer assisted writing. Next, methods of providing feedback that build self-confidence, encourage writing, and shift student focus from mechanical accuracy to the logical expression of ideas are described, including peer critiquing, positive feedback, and holistic scoring. (EJV)

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ERIC DIGEST

CLEARINGHOUSE FOR JUNIOR COLLEGES

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, LOS ANGELES

ED272258

August 1986

WRITING INSTRUCTION IN THE TWO-YEAR COLLEGE

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Since 1974, the English Council of the California Two-Year Colleges has published Inside English as a forum for the exchange of ideas and information about teaching English at the two-year college level. Over the past twelve years, the journal has traced legislative trends, highlighted major research efforts, and explained and assessed a wide range of instructional techniques for remedial writing, freshman composition, literature, and ESL courses. This digest draws upon the thirteen published volumes of Inside English to offer a summary of practitioners' advice on techniques to improve two-year college students' writing skills.

Underlying Principles

In their summary of fifty years of writing research, Dunning and Redd (1976) offer the following tenets of writing instruction:

-- isolated drills in usage, formal grammar, phonics, and spelling have little value. These skills are best learned in a context.

-- most students learn to write and read by performing real tasks: writing letters, memos, stories, reports, etc.

-- drills may be useful following diagnosis of weakness in a specific area, but not as a substitute for whole writing tasks.

-- students need help during the writing process.

-- sentence building is more productive than analysis or labeling.

Appropriate Writing Assignments

The instructors writing for Inside English seem to agree on the importance of designing writing exercises that are tailored in form and content to the skill levels of their students, that emphasize ideas as well as mechanical skills, that stress the utilitarian and practical aspects of writing, and that are enjoyable.

For basic skills students, exercises are recommended that build students' confidence in their writing ability by emphasizing the communication skills they possess, but may not be aware of having. Assignments involve simple writing tasks on personal topics, and are often ungraded. Techniques that are recommended for this pre-writing stage include:

Clustering. After the teacher writes a word on the board, the students free associate until they have a cluster of words which they use to construct a written passage.

Modeling. The students and teachers work in a group to develop a model of the completed writing assignment.

Brainstorming. Students write all they can on a given topic within a short period of time.

Controlled Writing. Students copy well-written passages altering them in some significant way, such as from present to past tense, from singular to plural, or from slang to Standard English to help students use some of the more basic conventions of the language.

Free Writing. On a daily basis, students write in-class for short periods, emphasizing quantity rather than quality, content rather than form.

Journal Writing. Students keep a written record of their thoughts and experiences. Some instructors provide writing assignments to be included in the journal, such as a series of social, consumer, or business letters to be written. Though errors are pointed out, students are graded on the basis of the quantity of writing they produce.

For more advanced students, assignments can include:

Summaries. Students read an essay and condense it into a brief restatement in their own words.

"Practices". The teacher provides a subject and a structure for the writing assignment based on a sequenced series of questions moving from the concrete to the abstract. The "practices" are to be written in one sitting as a rough draft.

Practice Essay Exams. Students learn to write under pressure in the conditions they will encounter in other classes.

Computer-Assisted Writing. Instructors use microcomputers for a variety of instructional purposes, including providing drill exercises on particular grammatical problems, helping students reduce the use of repetitious "to-be" constructions, improving spelling skills, and reducing the drudgery of repeatedly revising prose.

To build student motivation and maintain interest, many instructors develop writing assignments that focus on student interests either on a highly individualized level or by category of interest (e.g., arts, sciences, technical, commercial, or general interest). In some classes, students are encouraged to work on their assignments for other courses. Most instructors spend significant portions of their class time and office hours in mini-conferences with students during which they provide immediate feedback on writing and help students verbally explore their interests and opinions.

Feedback

An ongoing concern of English instructors is to develop methods of evaluating student writing that (1) build self-confidence; (2) encourage students to write; (3) shift student focus from mechanical accuracy to the logical expansion of ideas; (4) sharpen students' ability to discern and understand writing problems and elements of good writing; (5) teach students to be their own editors; and (6) minimize the teacher's role as proofreader. Some of the methods of providing this kind of feedback are:

Peer Critiquing. Peer evaluation is recommended by a number of teachers as a way of making feedback less threatening and discouraging, of involving students more fully in the learning process, and of helping students develop skills they can use in editing their own papers. Peer critiquing can be carried out in a variety of ways, but most commonly students are provided with a set of criteria to help them evaluate a given assignment. Usually more than one other student is involved in peer critiquing, and often the whole class is involved in providing verbal feedback.

Positive Feedback. The importance of praise and encouragement is stressed repeatedly. Some teachers suggest that positive comments always outnumber negative criticism. Areas of promise, striking images, lively language, honesty and individuality are targets for conversational notes and praise.

Identifying Errors. While most instructors agree that mechanical errors need to be brought to the attention of students, they also suggest a wide variety of strategies for providing this feedback. Some instructors focus on one kind of error at a time. Some mark only basic errors. Some circle or underline problem areas without identifying the kind of error that has been made, forcing the students to recognize their error as well as correct it. Most of the techniques have been developed to encourage students to edit and rewrite rather than accept passively teachers' editing.

Adaptations of Hirsch's Grading Scale. In The Philosophy of Composition, E. D. Hirsch suggested a grading scale with three differently weighted levels of evaluation criteria. The most stressed criteria were quality and development of ideas; and organization, relevance, and movement; followed by style, flavor, individuality; and wording and phrasing; followed by the least stressed criteria of grammar, punctuation, spelling, and form and legibility. Hirsch's original scale has been modified for use by a number of writing instructors, who assign weights based on the emphases of their own courses, while retaining the rounded perspective offered by Hirsch's original.

Holistic Scoring. As applied to writing evaluation, the holistic approach typically involves groups of readers scoring an essay on the basis of an overall impression of the whole work, rather than on isolated individual qualities.

As Helena Hale found in her interviews with community college composition instructors, similarities in instructional approach are far outnumbered by differences. While some instructors find journal-writing to be invaluable, others find it juvenile; some assert that all writing must be structured, others emphasize unstructured writing; some feel that the study of writing models teaches organizational skills, others argue that organization results from writing practice.

These differences of approach have been mirrored in Inside English. Lively debates have taken place in the pages of the journal regarding the appropriate role and methods of English instruction in the two-year college. Proponents and detractors of the use of computer-assisted instruction argue about potential benefits and dangers. Instructors who stress creativity over format and enthusiasm over mechanical accuracy are questioned by practitioners who point to the real-world need to communicate effectively in academic, employment, and life contexts. Proponents of the Writing Across the Curriculum approach cite the advantages of and obstacles to involving other instructors in improving student writing. By providing a means of communicating opinions, discussing successes and failures, offering encouragement and sharing doubts, Inside English helps to revive and revitalize instructors as they confront the ongoing challenge of finding improved methods of teaching an increasingly diverse group of students.

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All twelve volumes of Inside English will be available through the ERIC system in November 1986. Please refer to your November 1986 issue of Resources in Education for ERIC order numbers.

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